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ABSTRACT

As a result of program weaknesses found in a 1967 study of the counselor education program at Michigan State University, a new model entitled "systematic counseling" was developed. It has now been used with over 700 trainees and 6,000 clients in supervised practicum settings. Briefly, systematic counseling represents an organized means of translating general concepts into a form suitable for daily counseling practice. The development of Performance Criteria gives both trainees and supervisors a common set of standards for guidance throughout training, and the orderliness of the training experience allows the educators to develop an effective feedback network for continued program improvement. (Author/PC)

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SYSTEMATIC COUNSELING

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The outcome-based master's program in counseling at Michigan State University is the result of a series of steps taken by the counselor education faculty beginning with an evaluation of the ongoing program in 1967. From this study, which revealed a number of weaknesses in the existing program, a new model was developed for counselor preparation. This model was entitled "Systematic Counseling" and has now been used with over 700 trainees and the 6000 clients they have seen in supervised practicum settings. Since that initial evaluation the faculty* has made a number of revisions in their approach to instruction and has greatly embellished the original Systematic Counseling model.

Before stating what Systematic Counseling is, perhaps it would be well to indicate some things that it is not.

1. It is not a theoretical approach to counseling as such.
2. It is not a process that handles all client concerns equally well.
3. It is not an intuitive approach to interpersonal communication.
4. It is not a complex system that requires extensive prior training or experience.

A DEFINITION, PLEASE

What, then, is Systematic Counseling? Let's start with a definition. Systematic Counseling is an approach in which the various aspects of the

*Several faculty members worked together in this innovative effort. They are: Bob B. Winborn, Herbert M. Burks, Jr., Richard G. Johnson and James R. Engelkes.

counseling process are clearly identified and organized into a sequence designed to resolve the client's concerns efficiently as well as effectively.

Frequently when we examine approaches to counseling, we are unable to determine how the theory could be applied in practice. As indicated in the definition, Systematic Counseling was specifically designed to avoid this hazard. The search for models that met the needs of graduates of our program failed to reveal any that could be used without embellishment. The resulting product, in truth, was more something that the designers "backed into" than a model that was designed and put into practice without a great deal of debate, search, and trial.

As the designers attempted to develop the model, three scientific approaches were eventually selected to be used in combination. Learning theory and the principles of behavior modification were used for the theoretical and experimental base because, after considering known possibilities, it offered the most tangible set of principles for understanding the change process in counseling. However, we found no presentation of learning theory that offered an organized presentation of concepts suited for counselor training purposes. In our search for a way of critically reviewing and organizing concepts, we became familiar with the field of systems analysis. Principles of systems analysis were used to translate our many divergent thoughts into a coherent model of the counseling process. With a model developed, the designers now needed to consider the best means for presenting this model to inexperienced trainees. The growing field of educational technology offered many ideas about the materials that might be developed and the methods that might be used to

lead the trainees through a series of learning experiences that would encompass the entire training program.

A next critical decision was selecting or developing a set of standards that could be publicly announced and applied to various facets of the training program. Again, the existing assessment measures were not found to be adequate for our purposes and the process of developing our own assessment instrument was begun. This development has continued, with nearly annual revision, to the present. Called the "Performance Criteria," it assesses only the skills of the trainee in individual counseling situations. Comparable instruments could be developed for group counseling, program development and management, and any of the other skills that a practicing counselor should acquire during a formal training program.

YES, WE HAVE PRINCIPLES

In its present conceptualization, several principles have been established that guide Systematic Counseling both in training phases and in practice. They are briefly stated below.

1. Counseling is a voluntary act. Neither the client nor the counselor should be compelled to continue a counseling relationship that is uncomfortable or unprofitable.

2. Understanding the basis for client concerns is essential. This understanding should be made as objective (i.e., quantifiable) as possible. The counselor's perception of this understanding is verbally communicated to the client and then verified by him through communication with the counselor.

3. Counseling is goal-oriented. Both client and counselor share in goal-setting. When goals have been reached, counseling is terminated.

4. Counseling is a learning process. Principles of social learning that are useful in counseling include reinforcement, extinction, modeling, simulation, and feedback.

5. Any ethical means can be used to assist the client in the learning process. Resources in addition to the counselor are teachers, parents, spouses, and peers as well as many means of using technology for prompting, cueing, modeling and feedback.

6. All counselors have models or patterns that they use. Many are fragmentary or unpredictable. Systematic Counseling presents a logical sequence useful in most cases. Flexibility can be exercised when situations deviate from the usual.

7. The counseling interview is only a "testing ground" for the use of newly learned behavior. Counselor and clients both work to have this behavior occur in the natural environment--the home, the playground, the school or place of work.

8. The counselor has a responsibility for developing a means of monitoring this transfer of behavior and for meeting occasionally with the client thereafter in order to ensure this transfer.

9. Systematic Counseling incorporates a self-corrective mechanism by which results from evaluating the counselor's behavior are fed back to the counselor to help him in working with other clients.

TRAINING, ANYONE?

Our master's program contains a series of courses in psychology, related fields of education (such as test selection and use) and foundation courses in counseling (such as counseling theories). All of these are important in giving general awareness and background information that can be used in the practice of counseling. My focus in this presentation is upon those learnings and experiences that are directly related to the process of counseling.

Learning about the counseling process, as we have envisioned it, involves a series of simulations. The lowest level of simulation is reading

about the counseling process, learning the appropriate use of key concepts, and reading of their application to the counseling process. In addition to reading, the trainee also is provided with written case studies and abbreviated statements so that the trainee can begin to learn appropriate responses, although these responses are written and not oral. However, the written response should approximate an appropriate oral response.

Observation presents another source for trainee learning. Video and audiotapes are available that depict sound counseling practice. In addition, live classroom simulations and observation of actual counseling in field settings provide other forms of observational learning.

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

Great emphasis within our training program has been placed upon the laboratory experiences provided. Each trainee works with five peers and a supervisor to practice a wide range of skills that are all part of the Systematic Counseling process. When first learning a skill such as explaining or structuring the counseling process, trainees are encouraged to make use of performance aids that have been prepared. These aids raise critical questions that point toward improved performance. For example, when the counselor is to discuss responsibilities, the aid states:

1. Counselor can listen, observe, interact.
2. Counselor can help in clarifying concerns and stating alternatives.
3. Client is urged to communicate his concerns fully to the counselor.
4. Counselor can provide assistance, but responsibility for carrying out tasks remains with the client.

The trainee, as he works with a peer, is not encouraged to memorize this material. Rather, the trainee is urged to practice this counseling skill through the deliberate use of the aid initially and then to use the aid less and less. By the end of the training sequence, no need for performance aids exists because repetitive practice has caused the trainee to translate the concepts into the words that best fit his or her vocabulary and the concept now becomes the trainee's own.

Lab sessions are typically organized into working groups of three trainees and a supervisor. Each trainee, in turn, takes on one of three roles. The counseling role, of course, is the single most important one. After counseling, the trainee receives feedback from the trainee who was serving as observer as well as the trainee serving as "client." The other roles also provide learning experiences for trainees. The supervisor may instruct one trainee to assume that she is extremely depressed as the result of being unemployed for six months. Another trainee may be asked to assume that he suddenly finds that he is an alcoholic. Either role requires concentration and develops a better understanding of how people with genuine concerns feel when told, "Chin up. Everything will turn out OK." Such a response on the part of a counselor-trainee would probably bring stern reprimands from both observer and client to stop sermonizing.

The trainee who is observing is forced to be analytical in observation, yet present criticisms in a helpful light. This is a demanding task and the group with a good observer will go far! All members have each other as models and must make some discriminations as to which behaviors one should acquire and which are inappropriate or incompatible with the counselor's general style.

THOSE STANDARDS AGAIN

How does the observer know how to comment? This takes us back to the Performance Criteria. If we had no guide or standard, everyone's conflicting comment might have equal weight. But lab sessions, like the practicum that is to follow, are guided by the Performance Criteria with which the supervisor, observor, and counselor all are familiar.

Exactly what is the Performance Criteria? It is a document that is used to present and record three types of information about a given client or practicum simultaneously. A counselor, then, would use a separate copy of the Performance Criteria for each case that is begun. First, it lists the standards that are to be met or exceeded during all phases of training. Second, it provides cues and abbreviated examples that help the trainee at critical moments in the counseling process. Finally, it has space allotted within it for the trainee to comment to the supervisor and the supervisor to comment to the trainee concerning performance at each point in the counseling process.

Trainees are encouraged to listen to audiotapes of their interviews. As they do this, they may observe the cues or abbreviated examples and compare their response to those suggested. Similarly, as the supervisor listens to the audiotape or observes the trainee in counseling, comments can be recorded that relate to a precise point where praise or suggestion for improvement are applicable.

The final phase of the training program is the practicum which is done for two terms in a school, college, or agency. Each trainee spends at least one day per week in the field setting, attends a general

practicum discussion session weekly when examples of outstanding practice are presented and issues are discussed, then spends at least one hour each week with the practicum supervisor assigned.

I'M OK, YOU'RE NOT!

One of the built-in features of Systematic Counseling is the multiple uses of feedback. In addition to the forms of feedback that have previously been identified between observer and counselor, and supervisor and trainee, the program itself is in a continuing feedback network. Trainees are asked to make formal comment through evaluation of specific components of the training program and are also followed after graduation and again asked to identify components that were most helpful, those that are no longer used, and new practices that should be included. The faculty then is faced with a continuing process of redesign to make the program meet the changing needs of practicing counselors.

IN SUM....

Systematic Counseling, in short, represents an organized means of translating general concepts into a form suitable for daily counseling practice. The development of a Performance Criteria gives both trainees and supervisors a common set of standards for guidance throughout training and the orderliness of the training experience allows us to develop an effective feedback network for continued program improvement.